Transitioning from High School to University: Lived Experiences of Black First-Year Students

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ABSTRACT

Successful transitioning from high school to university remains a challenge for most students entering higher education. While the general first-year student population experiences challenges with transition, this can be acute for most Black students from poor home backgrounds. This qualitative study aims to determine how Black first-year students from poor home backgrounds navigate the transition to university and how their home and schooling experiences influence their trajectory to and through higher education. The paper uses a narrative approach to foreground the lived realities of six students from a university in the Free State Province of South Africa. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was used to broaden the theoretical base for understanding the transition into higher education. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth semi-structured individual interviews, and individual stories were constructed and analysed using the narrative approach. The findings unveiled factors in the layers of the ecosystem that may serve as enablers to transition and academic success. The paper argues for university academic and social support to acknowledge and embrace enablers to student transition and success as these would contribute to students experiencing a sense of belonging in the new education environment.

KEYWORDS

Lived experience; black students; Ecological Systems Theory; student agency; narrative approach.

INTRODUCTION

The first year in a higher education institution is recognised as a critical transition period in a student's life. This period is perceived as complex, non-linear, non-universal, dynamic and a developmental experience (Bowles et al., 2014; Gale & Parker, 2014; Graham et al., 2022; Mdodana-Zide & Mukuna, 2023; O'Donnell et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2021). Furthermore, Crafter and Maunder (2012) view transition as the experience of change rather than the process of change. Similarly, Gale and Parker (2014) regard the transition as the ability to navigate change or the competency to adapt to new situations. An inability to adjust often creates a barrier to student success, resulting in high failure and drop-out rates (Van Zyl et al., 2012). Mthalane et al. (2021) argue that despite the mechanisms and strategies implemented by universities and the Department of Higher Education's support to curb high drop-out rates, student drop-out continues to be on the rise.

Various studies have explored the lived experiences of first-year students around the globe. These investigations offer valuable insights into the overall journeys of these students, and the difficulties and opportunities they experience during their initial year in higher education (Adebola, 2021; Mdodana-Zide & Mukuna, 2023). For instance, a study conducted on international students at a public university in Turkey highlighted the importance of social support and cultural adaptation (Selvitopu, 2020). Additionally, in a study conducted in the United States of America, it emerged that students faced challenges with social integration, mismatched academic expectations and identity development. Nevertheless, these students reported a growing sense of belonging and personal development (Burger, 2016). An Australian study investigated the first-year experiences of non-traditional students, revealing that due to their collectivist orientation and associated values, these students often felt like outsiders among their university peers (Kearney et al., 2018).

Much attention has also been given to the first year of study due to the consistently increasing enrolment of students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. The total number of students enrolled in higher education institutions increased from 613 359 to 1 040 715 between 2002 and 2020, an almost 70% leap (Department of Statistics South Africa, 2020). The Department of Statistics South Africa's household survey further revealed that between 2002 and 2020, an increase in enrolment was only experienced among Black Africans – from approximately 369 242 to 769,088. The Coloured, Indian/Asian and White population groups experienced a decline in tertiary education enrolment numbers during this period. An increase in the number of Black African enrolments at universities could be attributed to the establishment of a government-funded scheme known as The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) in 1999, aimed at creating equal opportunities and increasing access and participation rates of deserving Black African students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Matukane & Bronkhorst, 2017). As De Villiers (2017) pointed out, NSFAS primarily serves students from poorer backgrounds, usually first-generation university students. Given the increase in the number of students from impoverished home backgrounds accessing higher

education, the transition to university presents a more complex and unique challenge as these students come from under-resourced public schools, often with ill-qualified teachers and are often first-generation students (McGhie, 2017).

Recent South African studies have highlighted the challenges that Black students experience with transitioning from high school to higher education (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2014; Matabane & Matabane, 2021; McGhie, 2017; Mgqwashu et al., 2020; Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010; Timmis et al., 2019; Timmis & Muhuro, 2019) with some of the studies focusing on Black students from rural contexts. McGhie (2017) examined the transition challenges and factors that enable Black students to adjust and succeed at university. The study identified three enablers to successful transitioning of these students: having the right expectations about what university study entails and taking responsibility for their own learning; motivation from family and friends and making good decisions about their choice of friends; and engagement with lecturers in and outside lectures.

Studies examining the experiences of students transitioning into higher education emphasised that although adapting to the first year can be challenging for all students, the situation can be dire for students from rural contexts (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2014; Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010). However, it is argued that parallels can be drawn between the experiences of students from rural origins and Black students from poor communities, as 64% of Black people live in poverty (Nqola, 2021). Timmis et al. (2019) highlighted challenges with the university curriculum, digital technologies and social media that students experience when they enter the university space from rural backgrounds. They pointed out the importance of examining the cultural capital, practices and knowledge that students use to negotiate challenges as they enter the unfamiliar space of higher education. They argue for higher education to bring knowledge to the forefront in curriculum transformation and give students a voice to make sense of their experiences (Timmis et al., 2019). In a similar study, Mgqwashu et al. (2020) investigated how prior cultural and educational experiences influence the higher education trajectories of students from rural communities. They highlight the positive impact of home and community social support on student agency and a sense of belonging. They contend that knowing the students and acknowledging and incorporating their prior experiences and histories is critical when transitioning into new ways of teaching and learning in higher education spaces. They argue that this would help foster student agency and a sense of belonging (Mgqwashu et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Timmis and Muhuro (2019) investigated rural students' digital transition to higher education. They asserted that students from rural communities experience a double disadvantage due to poverty and a poor schooling system with little or no prior experience in digital literacies and practices. Students from these contexts enter a digitalised university system which is entirely unfamiliar to their contexts and is characterised by a lack of digital devices such as computers, internet access and, in some cases, electricity. They concluded that universities need to acknowledge prior digital experiences and pay serious attention to

expanding student agency in supporting transitions (Chong & Quek, 2022; Tsakeni, 2021). Similarly, students who entered the tertiary education system during the COVID-19 pandemic were subjected to what is termed a 'double transition' in that besides the usual challenges that they face when entering the higher education system, students, particularly those from impoverished home backgrounds, were introduced to online teaching and learning systems with no access to the requisite technologies and connectivity, and in some cases no access to electricity (Nyar, 2021). Nonetheless, Czerniewicz and Brown's (2014) study on how a first-year university student from a rural background navigated technologies revealed that despite the student's digital illiteracy, the motivation that the home background elicited, and the personal agency became enablers in the student's journey to university success.

Insights from these studies suggest the need for further research to foreground the lived experiences of, and to understand the capabilities inherent in Black students to successfully transition into the higher education environment (Matabane & Matabane, 2021). Accordingly, this study contributes to existing research on the experiences of Black students transitioning from poor communities to higher education. More specifically, the study sought to draw insights from Black first-year students' home backgrounds, high school experiences and university experiences to determine the kind of support that would enable a successful transition into the university environment. The following research questions framed the study:

- What are the lived experiences of poor Black first-year university students, and how do these experiences influence their trajectory to university transition?
- What insights from the students' lived experiences can enable a successful transition into the university environment?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper locates transitioning from high school to and through university within the Ecological Systems Theory pioneered by Bronfenbrenner. This theory holds that human development is influenced by the various environmental systems – namely the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; 1977; 2005). The microsystem refers to the structures and processes in the developing individual's immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; 2005), including the family, school attended, peers, friends and the community. The microsystems interact and connect in ways that influence the individual at any given time. Bronfenbrenner refers to this layer of linkages as the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; 1977; 2005). Another layer known as the exosystem involves interactions in other settings or contexts in which an individual is not directly involved but influences the individual's immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; 2005). For instance, budget cuts in the NSFAS (financial support offered by the South African government to students from low socio-economic backgrounds) may impact their ability to progress with their studies, resulting in dropping out of the university. The other layer, the macrosystem, entails the

overarching culture or subculture typical of a given society or community within which these systems are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1976).

In addition to the four core systems, the chronosystem encompasses change over time in the characteristics of an individual and the environment in which individuals find themselves. These changes can influence development indirectly by affecting microsystem-level processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The chronosystem is particularly significant in the current context as the COVID-19 pandemic ushered sudden and drastic changes to teaching and learning both in the schooling system and in higher education, wherein teaching and learning at universities had to happen online. This presented a unique challenge for students, particularly those from poor communities, as they faced challenges with digital technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dube et al., 2022; 2023).

The core of the Ecological Systems Theory stems from the interactions within and between the microsystems and the various layers of the system. For instance, changes or conflicts in one layer may have a ripple effect within and throughout the other layers (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). As transitioning is a complex, non-universal and dynamic developmental experience, the Ecological Systems Theory allows for a better understanding of individual and contextual factors that influence Black students' transition to and through university. Furthermore, the theory allows for a broader understanding of proximal and distal systems impacting individuals transitioning from school to higher education.

METHODOLOGY

Narrative design

The narrative inquiry typically falls within an interpretive paradigm. The qualitative interpretivism paradigm allowed for exploring lived experiences through stories told by Black first-year students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Phothongsunan (2010) argues that in interpretive research, people construct and give meaning to their social world. Furthermore, given that interpretive research aims to draw meaning from the participants' perspective, qualitative methods are used to seek the experiences and perceptions of individuals (Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

Study participants

An invitation to participate in the study was extended to 731 first-year students registered in the Faculty of Management Sciences. The recruitment process encompassed distributing invitations on the university's Learner Management System, specifically on the first-year student community page. Despite concerted efforts to maximise participation, only nine students were willing to participate in the study. Consequently, the study comprised a group of nine Black first-year students. However, this paper is based on the constructed stories of six students. The reason for choosing and utilising data from six students stemmed from the observation made by both researchers during the analysis of interviews. It became evident that the data from three of the students lacked the depth and richness required to craft narratives that could

effectively address the research question. Furthermore, as both researchers conducted the data analysis, there was an opportunity to discuss the findings and draw conclusions regarding the data.

The six students were enrolled at a university in the Free State Province of South Africa. According to the university's student demographic data the majority, 97%, of students identified as Black Africans, with 65% of this group relying on NSFAS for financial support.

Data collection

Given the gap observed in existing literature concerning the transition into higher education, a qualitative study was designed to investigate the lived experiences of Black first-year students originating from underprivileged home environments. The primary objective was to gain insights into their experiences navigating the university milieu. To capture these experiences, semi-structured individual interviews were employed, generating narratives that offer a deeper understanding. In support of this choice of interviews, Ruslin et al. (2022) stated that semi-structured interviews provide flexibility and adaptability by permitting the emergence of novel ideas through probing during the interview process, as opposed to rigidly predefined questions found in structured interviews.

Interview questions related to students' home background, high school journey, and university experiences were developed as an interview guide. These interviews took place in the final quarter of the 2022 academic year. Each interview session was recorded digitally, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim.

Trustworthiness

Investigator triangulation was employed to enhance the study's trustworthiness. Patton (1999) suggested that having multiple interviewers or observers during fieldwork helps mitigate potential bias that may arise when a single individual collects all the data. In this study, data collection involved the collaboration of two researchers: one conducted interviews and at the same time, the other took notes and asked probing questions to elicit in-depth information from the participants. Additionally, voice recording devices were utilised during interviews, and the recorded content was transcribed verbatim. Furthermore, rich and thick verbatim descriptions of participants' accounts were used to support the findings. Regarding data analysis, both researchers analysed the data independently and met to discuss and reach a consensus on the findings. Guion et al. (2011) maintain that when the findings of different researchers converge towards the same conclusion, it strengthens the trustworthiness of the study's results.

Ethical considerations

Prior to embarking on the study, a request for ethical clearance was submitted to the Faculty Research and Innovation Committee, which was assigned reference number FMSEC06/22. Ethical principles were followed throughout the data collection process, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, safeguarding anonymity, and respecting privacy. Before commencing with each interview session, students were presented with an informed

consent document clearly explaining its contents. Each student was granted time to read the information before signing the consent form.

FINDINGS

A narrative analysis was employed by constructing individual stories from semi-structured interviews. In this approach, the narrative serves as the primary focus of analysis (Frost, 2011). Narrative analysis is a method used to interpret and analyse peoples' stories about their experiences. These stories are constructed to convey meaning and purpose (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008). Riessman (2008) suggests that narrative analysis can help researchers to identify the themes and patterns within the stories and to understand the social and cultural contexts in which they are embedded.

The process of analysis involved making a verbatim transcription of the interviews. This analysis allowed for an understanding of the lived realities of Black first-year university students from poor home backgrounds in relation to transitioning to university.

In each story, participants were assigned fictitious names to protect their identities. Their narratives describe their home background, high school experience and university experience. The constructed narratives of six students who participated in the study are outlined. They all come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, characterised by a food shortage, poor housing conditions, working-class jobs and reliance on social grants from the government. Given their home background, their study fees, books and living conditions are funded by the government's NSFAS.

Lethabo's narrative

Lethabo, aged 21, lived with his single mother, a street vendor, and his younger sibling at their grandmother's small dwelling known as a shack. The family relied mainly on the grandmother's state old-age pension grant to buy food. However, the grandmother died when the student was in Grade 7, and later, the mother died when he was in Grade 9. Both children lived alone in their grandmother's home for a while, and the sibling was moved to live with their aunt. The student described how dire their home situation was following the grandmother's passing:

Yes, so I went to ask for help for … [name of sibling] because the situation was not okay, and I went to ask for the family to at least take care of him because there was no food, and I told myself that let me so long keep pushing at school. Since then, I stayed alone [because the siblings had moved to live with their aunt] while pushing, and I would also go to my dad's place and eat. You see, he is with his wife and children, so during those times, I will go and ask for food so that I can at least go to bed with a full stomach.

Despite losing the two mother figures in his life and financial hardships, Lethabo passed Grade 9. However, in Grade 10, he lived alone in his grandmother's place. His life took a different turn as he engaged in unbecoming behaviour, expressed in the utterance below:

Mind you, I was a naughty kid, …See I was now staying alone, that gave me freedom. My friends would visit, and we would smoke, eat and drink I was naughty to the point where my accounting teacher chased me out of the class, and I was kicked out of school for the whole month.

The school reported the behaviour to his aunt, and he told her that he did not want to attend school anymore. This led to him failing Grade 10 twice.

A turning point in his life happened when he stole the neighbour's belongings and was caught and beaten by the neighbour. He came to his senses and said:

I mean I did make my mistake, he took his frustrations out on me - what has happened, has happened. Then I told myself that I will never do such things.

Following this, the aunt pleaded with the school to take him back. He chose new friends who were disciplined and dedicated to their studies. This motivated him to focus on his studies, and he continued with his studies and finished Grade 12.

My friend taught me to focus on my studies. I desired to pass exactly like him. The moment I started focusing on my studies, my school performance started to improve. When I reached Grade 11, I started doing well at school and was able to stand in front of the class and help other children. And the time I reached Grade 12, even the principal would say, "We are watching you and we want you to pass".

The friend's mother played a significant role in supporting the student's performance in school. She even invited Lethabo to stay with her family during matric examinations. He performed very well in matric and was accepted to study towards a bachelor's degree at university.

He started preparing for tertiary education by applying for studies in Grade 11. Although his parents did not have a post-school qualification, he desired to study at a university and later pursue his studies internationally.

Regarding transitioning to university, the student mentioned that he enquired about the support offered by the university to help him succeed. He participates in sporting activities and enrolled for the first-year student leadership programme and the peer mentorship programme.

As regards how the student navigated the university digital space, he described this as a total shock. He did not have a laptop, nor did he have access to desktops on campus. Nonetheless, a relative working at the university directed him to the relevant online student support services and helped him apply for a laptop and data. However, when he received the laptop, he did not know how to use it, but a friend guided him.

Giving an account of his expectations entering university from high school, he indicated that he expected to have his own space so that he could focus on his studies and career. Additionally, he was excited to have new friends and learn new things; moreover, he came from a different town. Academically, he struggled in the first semester because of the workload, but staying in a university residence with others motivated and helped him through his studies. This was captured in the following excerpt:

Then, it happened that the people I stay with are my friends, so they would say we're going to study at the library. I'd join them and sit together, study and it is[sic] all fun.

His motivation to perform well at university stems from his complex upbringing. He wants to offer support to his siblings so they do not experience the same hardship he had, as is evident from the following statement he made:

I do not want them to struggle, sometimes it is not even money, just support, like by any means - financially, socially, everything, like I will be there for them, that is what I want to do for them.

Kagiso's narrative

Kagiso, aged 20, lost her mother at a very young age and was raised by her grandmother. The grandmother also passed away when Kagiso was in Grade 10. The grandmother was receiving an old-age pension grant and a child support grant. Following the grandmother's death, she lived alone until her aunt came to live with her. The aunt took care of her until she completed Grade 12.

Sharing her high school experience, she mentioned the support from teachers. One of her Grade 11 teachers would assist her with food and buy her shoes. She mentioned that although she was not a high academic performer, the teacher noticed her hard work. She said the following about the general support from teachers:

Yes, they were very supportive - and not just supportive in teaching, but also in the conditions we live in, whether and how we live.

Since her dream was to become a chartered accountant, she had to upgrade Grade 12 Mathematics at a school for upgrading final-year high school marks. She mentioned that the Mathematics teacher at the school was well-versed in the subject. She managed to obtain an excellent passing mark in Mathematics.

Regarding her transitioning to university, although she appreciated the funding provided by NSFAS, she found entering the digital university space a challenge. She echoed her experience in this manner:

Honestly, the only problem I encountered was only based on working online. They expected us to use PCs use laptops and so on... It was my first time to use a laptop. I was staying with someone who assisted me whenever I was struggling with computer use.

Nonetheless, with the help of a fellow student with whom she was sharing an apartment, she successfully learned how to operate a laptop.

Keketso's narrative

Keketso, aged 20, resides with both parents, and her brother is still in primary school. Her sister is married, out of the home, did not complete university studies, and works in retail. Her father retired in 2015, and her mother, the sole breadwinner, works as a cashier in retail. After completing Grade 12, she stayed home for a year because she did not apply on time for university studies. She chose to study at this specific university because it was close to home,

and she did not want to leave the city she grew up in. NSFAS funds her studies and living expenses, but she chose to live at home with her parents and commute to the university.

Keketso shared her experience with online teaching, learning and assessments in this manner: *The issue I had was the COVID-19 thing where we had no classes, you had to study from home, write tests from home. We had online classes, but I had only one class online in one module. The lecturer was putting in effort for us to finish the work. But other lecturers were dropping slides and notes on ethuto……[i.e. the university Learning Management System]. It was really hectic for the first-year students. It didn't really make sense because you know, I'm a first-year student that must be guided. But it was a problem for students to engage with the lectures.*

She described the challenges she experienced with using a mobile phone for assignments. Nonetheless, she learned that taking responsibility for one's learning and meeting deadlines is crucial. Nevertheless, she expressed gratitude for the assistance provided by the university.

Thabang's narrative

Thabang, aged 21, was born in a village in the Eastern Cape Province and was raised by both parents. The family moved to the Free State for employment. He lived with both parents and a younger sister, but his father passed away in 2020. His mother works as a hospital porter.

Thabang completed matric in 2019, and in 2020 enrolled at a college to improve his matric results. Sharing his high school experience, he indicated that the teachers were mainly university graduates and were preparing learners for university studies. He shared the experience in this manner: "*So they are teaching like we were already in varsity, meaning you were supposed to be ahead you see, read ahead, then when you arrive in the class the teacher would ask you "what is it that you don't understand" [sic].*

Furthermore, in preparation for the Grade 12 trial and final examinations, learners were required to attend winter camps and sleep over at school over weekends:

Our teachers were dedicated to staying with us at school and camp with us at school over weekend [sic] and they will be available at night when we need their help [sic]; I felt that if the teachers sacrifice [sic] their own family to be there for us, we also had to study hard to show appreciation.

Thabang's mother could not cope financially after his father's death because his younger sister was still in school. The mother stays in a single-room dwelling with the younger sister. Thabang then applied for and received a bursary to improve his Grade 12 results. Prior to entering university, he acquired a laptop through the funds provided by the bursary. NSFAS is funding his studies and living expenses. He indicated that he chose to pursue university studies due to his aunt's status as a graduate.

In sharing his university experience, Thabang mentioned difficulties with online teaching, assessments, and lecturers who are less dedicated than his high school teachers. He related his experience in this manner:

I'm not used to the online platforms it became a bit challenging with the first assessment to adapt to it. Most of my lecturers were not active online. Only two were active. Those that were not active online would upload presentation slides, no audio recordings, no lecturing. In most cases lecturers delay [sic] to attend to our cry for help.

Regarding technology utilisation, the student received guidance on navigating the Learning Management System from a cousin who had previously attended the same university.

He highlighted the challenge of not being able to engage in small group discussions with fellow students to deliberate on course material due to the online learning format. Moreover, during the second semester when physical presence on campus was necessary, he encountered difficulties such as unfamiliarity with lecture hall locations. Being first-year students, they had not yet acquainted themselves with their lecturers, nor were they familiar with their names. The only instructor he was familiar with was the one conducting online classes:

With online classes, we could not ask questions because with physical classes you could stop the lecturer at any time and ask questions. I had a challenge with the audio, I would not hear that lecturer from his side [sic].

He also mentioned that he struggles to find study peers because students seem uninterested in working together in small groups. He suggests considering study groups if someone aims to succeed at university, "cause *[sic]* when you study in groups, you can help each other".

As regards how the university could assist first-year students to be successful in their studies, he said:

The first year at university feels like children coming from creche [kindergarden] to primary. We need a bit of guidance, not full guidance [sic]. Even us first-year students, we should come together to form study groups.

Daniel's narrative

Daniel, aged 19, his mother, and his siblings reside in the Free State Province, while his father lives in Gauteng Province and is employed as a security guard. His sister is the first university graduate in the family. His mother, who was a bank receptionist, lost her job when Daniel was in Grade 7. The family received financial support from the father and additional extended family members, including the grandmother and aunt. His dream is to become an accountant. He expressed his appreciation for NSFAS funding in this manner:

Without NSFAS most of the students couldn't have attended university. Even if the funding is not enough, it does help. When it's not enough we ask for help from families.

In sharing his high school experience, he highlighted the difference between high school and university, pointing out that in high school, if one fails in the first or second term, one need not be concerned because one will have a chance to do well in the remaining terms and move to the next grade. However, if one fails the first semester in some courses at university, one cannot proceed to the second semester and must repeat the course the following year. Furthermore,

at university time management is essential, "*Here every time you waste ah [sic] you will cry for it. Ya [sic] it is not the same with high school*". He further indicated that before enrolling at the university, he was already aware of what to anticipate, as he had a friend who had completed his studies at the same university. Furthermore, he had both a laptop and a Wi-Fi connection at the off-campus residence where he stayed. Additionally, a friend showed him how to navigate the Learning Management System used at the university.

He shared his experience with online teaching in this manner:

It was challenging because I didn't expect this. In school when I didnt't understand something I can [sic] raise a hand. With online teaching lecturers just summarise and, tell you, [sic] download the recording.

Daniel described how his family served as a source of motivation for him to dedicate himself diligently and concentrate on his academic pursuits. He expressed this as follows:

I'm not saying you must not have friends, but everyone has their own purpose of why they are here [at university], because we come from different backgrounds. My brother and sister said to me, if I waste time, this will affect my future because in the coming years I'll have to take care of my younger brother.

Khensani's narrative

Khensani, aged 19, comes from a city in the Gauteng Province. She lives with her mother, two siblings and grandfather. Her parents are separated. Her mother is unemployed, and her father works as a security guard but does not support the family. The family lives on the younger sister's child support grant and the grandfather's old age pension.

In sharing her high school experience, she pointed out that her school did not provide proper assistance to students in the process of applying for higher education. Consequently, she opted to take a gap year, during which she spent six months at home and another six months attending college. NSFAS funds her university studies.

When recounting her experience with online teaching and learning, she conveyed her experience as follows:

The first semester was a little bit hard for me because I have never studied online, and I did not even have a laptop. So, when our lectures would send emails and notes on ….[Learning Management System], I'd have another struggle with my phone as it had problems.

However, the student used her NSFAS book allowance to purchase a laptop. Regarding the difference she observed between high school and university, her remarks were as follows:

The difference is the workload - it is a lot. You must have [sic] time management and you are forced to be independent. In high school, even though you would have an upcoming test you would be able to manage while teachers would remind you to study, but in university the tests would be piled up just in one week. So, you must be disciplined and motivate yourself be able to push yourself to study.

DISCUSSION of FINDINGS

Lethabo's story suggests that students from low socio-economic backgrounds experience adversity early in their lives. He has experienced not having food and losing the main caregivers in his life. The effects of losing both caregivers led him to engage in ill conduct. However, he demonstrated remarkable resilience and determination in the face of challenges. Despite experiencing setbacks such as failing Grade 10 twice, he remained committed to his studies and eventually succeeded in passing his final year of high school. Jowkar et al. (2014) contend that individuals who exhibit resilience maintain intense levels of motivation and academic performance even when confronted with stressful circumstances and situations that could potentially hinder their educational progress and lead to eventual dropout.

Additionally, the findings suggest that being surrounded by friends who are dedicated to their studies within university residences could serve as a resource for students during their first year at university. Similarly, in the case of Kagiso, even though she initially encountered difficulties utilising computers for her academic work, she managed to overcome this hurdle by establishing a friendship with her flatmate, who offered guidance in navigating digital resources. This finding aligns with the observations made by Buote et al. (2007), who identified a positive link between such newly established friendships and the successful adjustment to university life. These authors indicated that this connection was much stronger among students residing on campus than those who commuted to the university.

Furthermore, it was observed that in high school, after Lethabo refrained from negative conduct, he was able to choose good and supportive friends. Therefore, he may have applied the same judgement when choosing friends upon entering university. According to McGhie (2017), choosing appropriate friendships enhances social integration among students as they transition into the university environment and plays a crucial role in achieving academic success.

Lethabo's story also revealed that motivation and encouragement from friends and teachers, including the school principal who said, "*We're watching you, we want you to pass smart" [sic] is important for academic success.* The study on enabling factors for a successful transition to university found that motivation from families and friends translates to self-motivation for success in higher education (McGhie, 2017).

Additionally, the narrative unveiled that coming from a poor home background can serve as a motivating factor for first-year students to exert themselves in their studies with the intent to improve the living conditions at their homes. This finding corresponds with the outcomes of a case study conducted by Czerniewicz and Brown (2014), who investigated a first-year university student from a rural background. In this study, the student's challenging home background served as a catalyst, motivating the student to strive toward attaining set goals. In the same way, Kagiso's story revealed the role of the extended family as a protective support system amid challenges, along with the motivation to diligently pursue education to improve her household circumstances. These could potentially function as enablers for successful adaptation into the higher education environment and, ultimately, for achieving academic

success. Similarly, Daniel's narrative revealed that receiving encouragement from family members and having a clear sense of purpose can improve the process of adapting to university life and achieving academic success.

Mgqwashu et al. (2020) emphasised the positive impact of familial and community-based social support on student agency and their sense of belonging. Furthermore, as a first-generation student, Kagiso is driven to put in significant effort to achieve her aspiration of becoming a chartered accountant. Moreover, the student displayed a goal-oriented attitude with a clear ambition to pursue her career.

With regards to Keketso's narrative, although she receives an allowance from NSFAS, her choice to reside with her parents and commute to the university daily likely emanates from her desire to take advantage of the support provided by her family.

Keketso described her challenges with online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the lack of an appropriate digital device (a laptop), she used her mobile phone to complete academic tasks. In the same way, despite not having a laptop, Khensani exhibited a solid resolve to attend online lectures and access study materials through a mobile phone, even though her phone did not always work. The hurdles of load-shedding and limited internet access due to insufficient data posed challenges. Taking charge of her situation, she decided to utilise her NSFAS allowance to buy a laptop, showcasing her sense of agency. In their study, Czerniewicz et al. (2009) noted that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds overcome constraints that would hinder completing academic tasks by using mobile phones. In this manner, they demonstrate persistence, which will facilitate their academic success.

Furthermore, it was observed from Keketso's story that the lack of support from most lecturers exacerbated the difficulties faced with online teaching and learning. Nonetheless, Keketso realised through the university academic support programme that academic success requires students to take responsibility for their learning.

Thabang's story revealed how his high school teachers prepared learners for university studies. He was aware of what would be expected to be successful at university, which could be an enabling factor for successfully transitioning to university. Similarly, Daniel indicated that he possessed the appropriate anticipation and understanding of what university studies involve - information that was conveyed to him by a friend. According to McGhie (2017), possessing this knowledge serves as an enabler to university success. McGhie (2017) points to the need to inform and equip Black students for university studies, ensuring they understand academic life before entering such environments. Furthermore, Thabang's experience was that, even though high school teachers were consistently accessible, even late at night, to assist students with their studies, it did not sufficiently and effectively equip them for higher education. This is because succeeding in higher education necessitates students to possess greater independence and take responsibility for their learning.

Nonetheless, Thabang demonstrated a sense of agency in that he purchased a laptop with bursary funds received before his university studies despite coming from a poor home background. In addition, the presence of an extended family member who had already graduated from university inspired him to embark on higher education studies. The experience with online teaching and learning revealed the lack of support from lecturers during these unprecedented times of lockdown. The students in this study experienced what Nyar (2021) refers to as a "double transition" from high school to university due to the sudden shift to remote teaching and learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION

The qualitative narrative approach elicited rich narratives about the lived experiences of first-year Black students from financially challenged backgrounds. These stories unveiled that, for these students, entering higher education also implied gaining financial support through NSFAS. One student highlighted that without NSFAS, the prospect of accessing higher education would have been unattainable.

A successful transition to university involved social support from extended family and friends and creating new support networks through flatmates to enhance technological skills. How students engage with peers, both on and off campus, especially those residing off campus, contributes to the support that first-year students need while adapting to their new educational environment.

The study has unveiled inherent attributes that students carry into the university setting, such as agency, resilience, perseverance and goal-directedness. These qualities could play a vital role in facilitating a successful transition. In support of this, Wang et al. 2021, assert that individual characteristics, personal attributes and social environments predict the academic adaptation of students in a university environment.

Consequently, universities should nurture these innate characteristics to improve student adaptation and academic achievements. Instead of shaping students to conform to the university's environment, which Mgqwashu et al. (2020) criticise as "mis-recognition", institutions should tailor their approaches to cater for the diverse needs of students from various backgrounds. This way, students' unique cultures should be embraced, fostering a sense of belonging and thereby giving way to student agency within the university context. Globally, universities could offer training in cultural competency to increase awareness of potential biases and foster a more inclusive classroom atmosphere. Furthermore, university departments responsible for supporting first-time entering students' social and academic development could offer ongoing workshops and seminars to address diversity, equity, and inclusion matters. These interventions could facilitate open discussions and advance a more inclusive campus culture.

Additionally, the Ecological Systems Theory offered a valuable framework for understanding how different ecological systems such as extended family, friends, schoolteachers, and governmental financial support systems such as NSFAS can interconnect to

create an enabling environment for students to successfully transition to and through university, ultimately leading to academic success.

Finally, in agreement with the views of Czerniewicz and Brown (2014), it is affirmed that students from underprivileged backgrounds should continuously and consistently maintain access to a range of resources while establishing supportive networks. This is crucial for their seamless transition into and subsequent success within the realm of higher education.

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